

Article

Taijiquan the “Taiji World” Way: Towards a Cosmopolitan Vision of Ecology

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Abstract: In this article, we present a case study analysis of data gathered on the practice of the art of Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) in one UK context. Our interest in looking at this physical culture was in exploring if/how physical cultures of shared embodied experience and practice may help “sow the seeds of environmental awareness”. In so doing, we illustrate certain affinities between this interpretation of the art and Beck’s idea of a “cosmopolitan vision of ecology”. We present an analysis of documentary and interview data of one English Taijiquan organisation and how it currently promotes the idea of interconnectedness, wellbeing and an alternative meta-narrative for living through the practice of Taijiquan. We conclude that, while further research is needed, there is evidence that a cosmopolitan vision for ecology is emerging in physical cultures such as Taijiquan.

Keywords: Taijiquan; Daoism; self-cultivation; nature; ecology; embodiment

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growth in research output from sociology that focuses on issues of environmentalism, ecology, sustainability and climate change [1]. Much of this work is informed by a

perspective that “The economics and politics of climate change presuppose the greening of societies!” [2] (p. 255). This perspective is mirrored to an extent in an emerging consensus in the communities of social scientific study of sport, leisure and physical culture, that hitherto insufficient attention has been paid to the social significance of climate change and sustainability, and, concomitantly, that much more work in this area is needed. For example, Mincyte, Casper and Cole [3] (p. 105) consider that in spite of a degree of, “greening of mainstream leisure industries and the resurgence of environmental discourses in popular culture, connections between sports and its environments continue to be relatively understudied in scholarly work”. They further point out that while attention has been paid to issues such as infrastructure and policy relating to sporting organisations, the issue of culture and the embodied experiences of sports culture need to occupy researchers’ attention. This is made all the more significant if we consider the focus provided, initially by Humberstone [4] and more recently re-emphasised by Wheaton [5] (p. 283) who states that, “as Humberstone suggests, nature-based sports may ‘sow the seeds of environmental awareness’”.

In approaching how sociology might best engage with these issues, Shove [6] argues for focus on the ideas of practice and habituation and their implications for developing a more embodied understanding of ecological awareness in society. This shift in thinking represents an important theoretical intrusion into what has hitherto been an area dominated by cognitive, behaviourist perspectives. Such an approach represents a more active and dynamic view of human agency which is an important strategy for understanding change as it addresses the issue at the level of embodied practice, belief and emotion; elements of human social life that go beyond the limiting clutches of modifying the “rational” understanding of “passive” social actors. In addition, Urry [7] recently commented that the sociology of climate change and environmental sustainability needs to reinvigorate the idea of a utopian sociology. He elaborates that sociology must provide more than a critique of humanity’s present socio-ecological activities that may lead to future dystopias (although these too are important), and also engage with positive future scenario’s or utopias. Utopias are necessary in order to develop ideas and visions for what future societies might aspire to in terms not only of environmentally sustainable social structures and policies, but also, crucially, of beliefs and cultural lifestyle practices that must take place within societies mitigating against and adapting to climate change.

One utopianist vision already forwarded by Beck [2] addresses the idea of a “cosmopolitan vision of ecology”, which he theorises as containing a number of positive and negative elements. Three of these are outstanding for the way in which they engage with “positive” futures which implicate beliefs and lifestyle practices; interconnectedness, revised understandings of wellbeing/equality and an alternative meta-narrative of/for the future. In this paper, we present a case study analysis of data gathered on the practice of the art of Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) in one UK context, an English organisation known as “Taiji World” (pseudonym). In so doing, we illustrate certain affinities between this particular interpretation of the art and Beck’s [2] idea of a “cosmopolitan vision of ecology”. In what follows we first provide a brief context of how Taijiquan (in the UK) has come to be associated as a “self-cultivation practice” with strong historical and conceptual connections to the Daoist (Taoist) philosophies of the body, human action and nature. Our analysis then considers Beck’s three positive aspects of a cosmopolitan vision of ecology alongside case study data of Taiji World. Through this, we illustrate how Taiji World promotes ideas of interconnectedness, wellbeing and an alternative meta-narrative for living through its contemporary interpretation of Taijiquan practice in ways which

bear a marked alignment with Beck's notions of a cosmopolitan ecology. We conclude that, there are signs that physical cultures such as Taijiquan may, in some instances, indeed help, "sow the seeds of environmental awareness" [4] (p. 388). However, we also caution that there remains much to understand about how lived processes of adopting and adapting traditional philosophies and practices such as Taijiquan in the contemporary period may contribute to more socio-ecologically sustainable lifestyles.

2. Taijiquan, Daoism and Ecology

La Rochelle [8] (pp. 64–65) provides a helpful description of Taijiquan as a movement form which,

Traditionally is based on Chinese calisthenics that are practiced slowly and smoothly and usually involves a meditative dimension akin to that found in Indian yoga. By focusing on breathing, practitioners claim to feel the energy (qi) flowing through their bodies, an energy that provides a therapeutic effect on every organ of the body...Beyond the meditative and therapeutic aspects, diligent practitioners usually are aware that taiji quan also is a fighting art, with each movement designed to counter a physical assault. Muscle/mind relaxation trains practitioners to "listen" to their adversaries, to feel and follow their aggressive energy and redirect it against them.

However, as La Rochelle [8] (p. 65) illustrates Taijiquan, "is actualized in a North American socio-cultural context so that it meets the expectations of a certain category of practitioners...the 'spirituality of taijiquan' as presented by Western books has less to do with Chinese religious tradition than contemporary spirituality cloaked in old Daoist imagery". We consider this interpretation may be extended to the UK context and also consider that Taijiquan, as a simultaneously, spiritual, martial and health-based social practice, is very much open to interpretations stimulated by its long and multifaceted development. In what follows we briefly consider some of the connections with Daoism and ecology that have emerged.

In opening his authoritative discussion on Taoism (Daoism), Kirkland [9] (p. 2) argues "most scholars who have seriously studied Taoism both in Asia and in the West, have finally abandoned the simplistic dichotomy of Tao-chia and Tao-chiao—'philosophical Taoism' and 'religious Taoism'". Other definitions and distinctions have proven as enigmatic as Daoism's core tenets, and been similarly fated to the accusation of the imposition of false categories and/or Orientalism [8,9]. Indeed, Kirkland [9] (p. 181) points out that the main reasons for this is that, "Taoists were never labouring to remain true to some 'original message', the way that Christians, Jews, Confucians, and to some degree, even Buddhists often tried to do". That said, one element of Daoist practice that seems consistently present in the enormous body of classical Daoist literature is self-cultivation, which leads Kirkland [9], (p. 192, *emphasis original*) to conclude, "it might be fair to say that the core of Taoist practice—from classical times down to the present—has involved a practice of self-cultivation within a cosmos comprised of subtly linked forces". In elaborating this idea Kirkland [9] (p. 192) suggests:

Taoists typically believed that personal transformation must be a holistic transformation, a transformation of all their being—including what other traditions have often distinguished as mind, body, and spirit—in accord with the most subtle and sublime processes at work in the world in which we live.

Both Clarke [10] and Miller [11] broadly concur with Kirkland's [9] position and each provide detailed discussions of the relationship between the principles of Wu Wei and Yin/Yang duality, which are core Daoist constructs [12]. However, each of these scholars are also cautious about modern interpretations and adaptations of these connections, with Miller [11] (p. 139) pointing out that, while Daoist ideas of nature and the natural environment "has functioned as a kind of sacred space for Daoists. It does not follow from this, however, that Daoists are necessarily good environmentalists by a modern Western definition". In spite of this, interpretations of Daoism in modern Western contexts have adapted and infused the basic Daoist premise of harmonising with one's environment with more explicit ideas of environmentalism. Clarke [10] (pp. 83–84) conveys the position of many eco-feminists who argue that Daoism is a philosophy "which helps to reconceptualise the human self and human relationships in ways which honour 'holistic integration, interrelatedness, embodiment, caring and love' (Tucker and Grim, 1994: p. 187)". In addition, Clarke [10] (p. 84) points to the Deep Ecology movement and the significant influence Daoist thinking had on the founder Arne Naess and the subsequent impact Deep Ecology is having on Western Culture. However, Clarke [10] (p. 88) also warns that it is important not to recommit the "sins of orientalism" and think of Daoism and its practices as merely another Oriental "resource" to be "exploited", as has been done in the past. Therefore, in spite of a sense of caution, we agree with Clarke [10] (p. 89) that Daoist terms and practices:

May at least help us to examine our current ways of living in a new light. The recapturing of a sense of the cosmic content of human life at one extreme, and at the other the cultivation of a non-aggressive attitude to life may, as contributions to a changing attitude of mind, be the key to a more ecologically benign way of life than one which is driven by the ideal of "progress" and which is strenuously busy trying to change the world.

Scholars of Daoism have variously commented on the relationship between Taijiquan and Daoism. For example, Kirkland [9] (p. 6) considers Taijiquan "loosely associated with Taoism", although does also point to the links between Daoism and the "tantric traditions of East Asia" as being profound and uncoincidental [9] (p. 206). Miller [11] (p. 66) postulates that Taijiquan, "is the most widespread, popular practice connected with Daoism", whereas, Clarke [10] (p. 138) offers the view that there is a close relationship commenting, "Schipper is surely right when he remarks that Taijiquan is 'an excellent initiation into the very essentials of Taoism'". These interpretations capture something of the spectrum of views ranging from the idea that Taijiquan is an ancient art that draws upon Daoist principles of self-cultivation to the view that Taijiquan is a specific Daoist self-cultivation practice.

Rather like Daoism, Taijiquan's exact origins remain historically unverified in academic terms, and what is known is neither uniform nor unified. Miller [11] (p. 66) contends that "what we can say with historical certitude is that the invention of Taiji quan, for whatever reason, came to be attributed to Zhang Sanfeng and he became revered as an important figure whose statue can be found in many Daoist temples including the Baiuyun [Baiyun Monastery] in Beijing". Zhang Sanfeng is remembered as an advanced Daoist practitioner/hermit/immortal living either in the 13th or 14th century and the creator of *neijia quan* (the Internal School of martial arts). He, along with other Daoist monks of Wudang Mountain area of China, are credited with developing "ways of manipulating qi and even projecting it from the body that could be applied to hand-to-hand combat" [11] (p. 66). However, a number of scholars such as La Rochelle [8] point out that the connections to this mythical figure, these

practices and Taijiquan are unsubstantiated and it was later in the 17th and 19th Centuries that Taijiquan along with other art forms such as *bagua zhang* and *xingyi quan* became associated as forms of internal Daoist arts. Miller [11] (p. 66) describes that in its Daoist form Taijiquan is seen as *Qi* cultivation of exercise in which:

The individual physically embodies the interplay of yin and yang in sequences of movements that embody assertive (yang) and receptive (yin) modes of action...At a more cosmic level, it is possible to see Taijiquan as a type of ritual dance in which one embodies and plays out the basic yin-yang complementarity of the Dao.

What interpretations such as these reveal is that Daoist logics and beliefs are believed (or can be believed) to be built into the foundations of Taijiquan's movements and these logics inform us of the self-cultivating purpose of its practice.

Regarding Taijiquan as a martial art or combat system, there are significant arguments forwarded by scholars such as Henning [13] suggesting a military origin around 400 years ago. In these accounts, the art is normally attributed to a Chinese General, Chen Wangting (dated around 1580–1660), whose art was later transmitted secretly among his local descendants (in the Chen village). Henning's analysis illustrates how surviving archives showed a focus on realistic self-defence and military applications in armed and unarmed combat. According to Mroz [14] and Raimondo [15] at this point there was little evidence of Daoist philosophies of nature, the body and spirituality, as the art's purpose was for China's defence and later for the personal protection and tradition of the Chen family clan.

In the mid-19th century China, "as modern weaponry became common, the necessity of secrecy waned in traditional boxing" [14] (p. 25), eventually Taijiquan left the Chen family circle via Yang Luchan (1799–1872). Yang Luchan founded the Yang Style Taijiquan [16], and after an impressive demonstration of his fighting skills was invited to teach his art to important members of the Imperial Court of China. Mroz [14] highlights that during China's political struggle with European powers, the literati of the Imperial Chinese government began to use modified versions of Taijiquan, as a symbol of national and cultural identity. Green [17] further suggests that, at this point in history, the alignment with the then influential authorities of Daoist philosophy helped reinforce ideological resistance to Western Imperialist powers. During this period a gradual disembedding occurred, removing many of the martial and military aspects of the art and a re-embedding of Daoist philosophies and mythologies. As mentioned above, the common "creation" story about the early development of Taijiquan emerged around the late 17th century and gained legitimacy thereafter, culminating with the Chinese government's 2006 declaration that Chen style taijiquan is part of China's cultural heritage [15]. These connections are now widely reproduced in the popular contemporary literature surrounding Taijiquan. In particular, the close connection between Daoist philosophy and Taijiquan remains a major underlying claim that is often supported by experiential interpretation [14] in modern Taijiquan despite various other elements and stages in its development that we highlight very briefly below.

After the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Taijiquan experienced further phases of (reflexive) modernisation. The new Communist ideologies of equality, anti-tradition, secularism and mass productivity had a massive impact on the art of Taijiquan with traditional styles subjected to official clampdown [13], including house arrest of Master practitioners [18]. The 24-"step" or posture Taijiquan, also known as the "simplified form" was developed in this period. It was created

by simplifying and reducing the much longer 108-step Yang style Taijiquan forms by four Taiji teachers in 1956 in Beijing in service of the Chinese Sports Committee's desire to create culturally relevant exercise programs for the masses. This short, solo practice form replaced the previous equal emphasis on partner training and resulted in a relatively simple form that could be regulated and transmitted across the nation among the numerous state-controlled institutions. At this point the popular phenomenon of mass outdoor practice (of short forms) emerged in courtyards and parks under supervision of the Communist government. These shortened forms have also become highly popular internationally.

State-imposed restrictions and cultural modifications led to a diaspora of many Taijiquan masters to Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1940s and 50s. From there, the art began to spread internationally, being transmitted to the United States and elsewhere via masters such as Zheng Manqing (Cheng Man Ching). According to Ryan [19], the dance specialist Gerda "Pytt" Geddes (1917–2006) was probably the first to teach a known form of Taijiquan in the UK in the early 1960's in London after she had learnt Yang style Taijiquan in Hong Kong [20]. Today, in late modern Britain Taijiquan is most commonly practised for health, meditation and spirituality by relatively large numbers of people. Sport England's [21] recent statistics suggest the practice of Taijiquan increased by 18,200 (102,200 to 120,400) between 2005/6 and 2007/8, and now ranks at around 38th of the top 80 sport and physical activities practised in the country. Yet according to Ryan [19], very few British schools balance martial and spiritual aspects due to the strong emphasis on the more accessible simplified forms and Qigong. The increased adoption of the art with a health-based focus is undoubtedly enhanced by evidence from a growing body of quantitative biomedical studies on Taijiquan and health promotion. These have tended to focus on novice elderly and clinical populations and emphasised the measurable transformations of balance, fear of falling [22] and the promotion of stress relief and wellbeing [23]. Taiji World is representative of such a trend, although the instructors also practice and teach more the "traditional" and combat-orientated style of Zheng Manqing style Taijiquan (reflecting his earlier Taiwanese lineage, which retained a degree of focus on self-defence). Clearly, even within a single organisation, Taijiquan is a broad term carrying varying interpretations both in China and the West. Nevertheless, in spite of all of these variations, Taijiquan's associations with self-cultivation, nature, outdoor practice and Daoist philosophy appear relatively constant and continue to bind the spectrum of Taijiquan styles.

3. The Case Study Method

Taiji World was not selected to represent Taijiquan as a whole, but rather to consider a trend of development that appears to respond to environmental and ethical philosophies emerging in late modern British Taijiquan and, in particular, the often claimed potential of Taijiquan to foster alternative mind-body-nature interconnections. Following Stake [24] (p. xi), we selected a qualitative case study approach to this study as it facilitated, "coming to understand" Taijiquan "within important circumstances". In practice, as Hartley [25] (p. 324) points out, a case study typically involves multiple methods to explore the interactions and processes within an organisation, where "complex phenomena may be best approached through several methods". Subsequently, the case study methodology adopted three main data collection strategies: Documental and media data, participant observation and life

history data. This is particularly important for new topics, which require rich exemplars to foster broader discussion [26]. In what follows we briefly highlight each of these in turn.

3.1. Document and Media Data

Documentary data analysis remains a core hermeneutical technique for understanding practices and meanings of social groups. Moreover, the combination of document data alongside data from individuals is a useful strategy following Lindsay [27], who illustrates how documents can be sufficiently implicated into individuals' lives and lifestyle actions and choices as to be granted a degree of agency in their own right. Today there are numerous types of documents available in modern Taijiquan schools beyond the "traditional" texts such as the *Dao de Jing*, including leaflets, posters, books and syllabuses often provided in the early days of training. Additionally, electronic sources such as e-books, DVDs, websites, Facebook groups, Twitter photo albums, MySpace profiles and YouTube all contribute to ever more significantly to our understanding of Taijiquan knowledge, practice and identity. Each of these can provide a variety of data on Taijiquan through prospective claims about an art as well as data containing reported practices and experiences. In this case, we examined a range of types of documents relating to and drawn on by, one Taijiquan organisation, Taiji World, which is based in South West England. These documentary data were initially collected in 2008 and have been incrementally added to since that point, taken together these data sources provide a considerable overview of the activities and outputs of the organization.

3.2. Observational (Fieldwork) Data

Secondly, participant observation in a regular Taiji World class was undertaken by two of the authors. This afforded a collection of data on the embedded Daoist practical and spiritual-philosophical aspects of this organisation. For reasons of space and focus, no fieldwork data is included in this article. However, it is worth mentioning here because it was through observational fieldwork that the Taiji World teacher (Joe) represented here was approached to become an interview participant for this study.

3.3. Life History Data

The third strategy was to include life history data. In agreement with Plummer [28], we found that the collection of life history interview data allowed for a more detailed exploration of individuals' experiences as situated within our case study organisation. Joe's life story emerged at a later point of the fieldwork, after trust and rapport with George had been generated from his regular attendance at a class. George met Joe on two occasions in 2008 for a lengthy dialogue in which open questions and a semi-structured interview format were followed after the adaptation of Atkinson's [29] suggestion of a broad opening question: "Tell me about your life and how you got into Taijiquan." A further interview was also arranged to follow up on the interview transcription made available to Joe in a "member check" in which he checked for factual errors, technical clarification. Feedback on initial coding

themes¹ was also sought at this point. Since these earlier meetings, further contact has been made with Joe and other members of the organisation to confirm their agreement on our publishing this analysis.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

There were various ethical considerations for this study. As Plummer [28] has noted, because of the personal nature of life stories and observational data, ethical issues are a priority from the very beginning in qualitative research. This is also very important in dealing with public and health-related documents such as those Taiji World circulate. Furthermore, Stake [24] stresses the importance of ethical concerns of respecting the viewpoints communicated within the case study, as the alternative philosophies of the body and environment were treated with a cautious academic criticism. With this in mind, three particular procedures were used to enhance our ethical practice. Firstly, due to the intimate nature of Taijiquan communities, all names, places and institutions were changed to protect the identities of the participants, although Joe specifically requested for his first name to remain, which we have respected (similar to de Campos Rosario, Delamont and Stephens, [30] with their life history of a Capoeira teacher). Second, an interview transcript was provided to Joe, who was made clear that changes would be made if requested as based on certain sensitive details of his personal and family life. Finally, Joe was fully informed of the research procedures, and was conscious that he could withdraw from the study at any time.

Similar to other martial arts researchers like Spencer [31] and Joseph [32], we also are/were practitioners of various martial arts and each of us have studied Taijiquan for periods of our lives. This experience has allowed some critical distance from the particular field of study while at the same time our embodied experiences allow for some experiential familiarity with the art and its core practices in a way similar to that found by Atkinson [33] in Yoga and fell running cultures.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data were analysed as a process using thematic content analysis. Drawing on Maykut and Morehouse's [34] technique of "indwelling" and assessing key themes, words and phrases through a combination of theoretical and emergent coding. First, George categorised and interpreted these codes and assembled in draft form the core emergent themes being Daoism, environmental sensitivity, interconnectedness, lifestyle, "mind-body-nature integration", and wellbeing. However, as Hartley [25] reminds us, an effective case study should carefully consider alternative explanations of the evidence. Accordingly, after critical discussion over the interpretation of themes and the data, next David assisted with the paper's theoretical framing and writing, and in so doing also offered further interpretation around the conceptualisations of Beck's [2] work on a cosmopolitan ecology. In the final stage Andrew provided critical feedback on the internal coherence of the ideas. In what follows, we present an analysis of the organisation of Taiji World which is interleaved with selected moments from Joe's life history interview data. Together they depict an organisation that shows signs of a

¹ The member check was not used as a post-positivistic form of validity check, but rather for generating further dialogue on the themes emerging during the interviews.

cosmopolitan vision of ecology. As the analysis progresses, we present more detailed explanations of Beck's concepts alongside the data.

4. Analysis: Taijiquan the Taiji World way

Taiji World is a professional commercial organisation dedicated to the dissemination of Taijiquan in an accessible and contemporary format via the 24-step and 48-step combined forms (as mentioned above) and various associated Qigong sequences. It is run by five senior directors/instructors (and number of associated instructors) teaching throughout rural "Dontshire", several other Southern English counties and London. At the time of writing, instructor numbers were expanding with their two-year instructor training courses leading to newly qualified instructors joining the association and offering courses in new areas. The organisation was originally known as the Dontshire School of Taiji since its inception in 1998, although the founder Paul Smith changed this to Taiji World in 2004 in order to emphasise Taijiquan's universal appeal across space and culture. Analysis of Taiji World's documentation quickly reveals its focus and purpose. Activities offered include regular scheduled club sessions and a wide range of rural retreats, camps, workshops, short courses and bespoke services such as work with businesses, schools and hospitals. It has recently begun distance-learning courses on the history, philosophy and practice of Taijiquan, and produces and sells a range of instructional DVDs, books and e-books. Taiji World has also developed one of the UK's most prominent and professionally presented Taijiquan websites using high quality photography that provides symbolic imagery alongside minimalist metaphorical text, presented via the latest web construction technologies. In addition, the organisation represents itself through a substantial amount of internet-based literature and videos disseminated through web-based communication technologies including Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter and the satellite and internet TV channel 'Body in Balance'. In short, it is a prime example of a very contemporary interpretation and presentation of what is an old self-cultivation art.

4.1. Taijiquan as a Wellbeing Practice

Beck's [2] second thesis concerns wellbeing and equality as *increasingly* intertwined social issues. A greening of modernity, he argues "will have to include a new vision of human prosperity which will not be the economic growth held by those worshipping at the altar of the market. It will define wealth not in gross economic terms but as overall 'wellbeing'" [2] (p. 262). Central to this vision is that alternative forms of wellbeing cannot be made with the late modern, high carbon, affluent consumerist lifestyles of the few in developed societies as the central, implicit ideological reference point. Further to this, aspirations of developing countries to attain equality with countries/individuals with such lifestyles as a modernist "objective" will need displacing. The utopianist idea Beck refers to infers sustainable social systems and lifestyle practices which promote simpler, low carbon forms of subjective wellbeing. Clearly, deep personal change will be required on an historically epic scale and, as such, a utopia of this description is unlikely to be experienced as anything like utopic by even a substantial minority, as Beck [2] (p. 255) elaborates:

The hardcore sociological question is: Where is the support for ecological changes supposed to come from, the support which in many cases would undermine their lifestyles,

their consumption habits, their social status and life conditions in what are already truly very uncertain times?

Through the representation and practice of its various activities, Taiji World delivers its own interpretation of Taijiquan and Qigong, which explicitly re-emphasises and applies to a modern cultural context some of the key Daoist principles including alternative notions of time and space, “yielding”, internal Qi training, and the concept of Yin/Yang duality. This is illustrated below:

Taiji is a dynamic form of moving meditation which helps to bring about calm and peace of mind whilst gently exercising the whole body. It stresses the principles of relaxation and yielding, and the cultivation of inner strength and harmony of both body and mind. The practise of this art brings us into balance with ourselves and those around us. It is a form of “inner” martial art [35].

However, as a revised secular interpretation for what Taijiquan is and does, these are articulated relationally with Western culture as a potential tonic or even panacea to the “hectic” pace of modern (Western) life:

Together, Taiji and Qigong offer a wealth of benefits much needed in today’s hectic world. Where modern life is fast paced and stressful, Taiji and Qigong help us to slow down and rebalance ourselves. When we can’t seem to switch off and our mind is spinning, both these arts help us return to a calm, peaceful state free from worry and anxiety [35].

While Taiji World is not alone in interpreting Taijiquan in this manner, the expression and presentation of this approach that suggests the emergence of a rather more coherent, sophisticated orientation that is adapted to and indeed fused with key elements of a Western cultural habitus [36]. For example, the way in which Taiji World addresses wellbeing as fundamental to Taiji practice is a significant and contemporary refinement of the Taijiquan focus. Indeed, Taiji World’s meta-narrative of Taiji is practically positioned as something that can produce a “balanced”, “slower”, peaceful, quiet optimism and a resolution to live more simply with oneself, others and, as we shall see, nature, in order to achieve subjective wellbeing. In an interview, Joe reinforced this interpretation:

I will not say that Taiji is just a health art, because it’s not. But what we teach is for health and wellbeing. Our emphasis is not on teaching them how to fight. Although if they want to learn that stuff, we teach workshops on it and that kind of thing. But our primary interest, largely due to our own interests and the groups of people that we work with...[is health and wellbeing] [37].

In constructing this association with wellbeing, Taiji World uses metaphorical language and symbolism in its public presentation and practices. This is not merely a commercial strategy (although it clearly is used as a successful marketing tool to call out to or “hail” those pre-disposed to such messages), but rather a continuation of a practice evolved from a deeply rooted tradition in the communication of Daoist knowledge itself. For example, a central advertisement for the organisation that runs nationwide illustrates Paul Smith practising Taijiquan as meditation alone on an empty beach, wearing one of his own design (eco) t-shirts, below a bright sun and dark clouds very close to splashing waves. His windswept hair gives the impression that he is exposed to various elements of

wind, sun, water and earth—the caption simply and evocatively reads “slow down”. The Taiji World Website delivers another important Daoist metaphor in the following description on of the idea of Qi as “flowing” as like water in a river;

When qi is not flowing, when qi is stuck or stagnant, things begin to spiral downwards. A pure, flowing river supports life but when the water is blocked, things begin to stagnate and rot. In a similar way, when qi becomes blocked and stagnant in the human body, illness and pain result [35].

Here, Taiji World draws upon the concept of Qi, which appears in slightly different adaptations in a number of Asian traditions including the yogic notion of *Prana* and Japanese martial arts notion of *Ki* energy. Qi is a probably a proto-Daoist construct from the 4th century BC that was adopted as a central idea by later classical Daoist thinkers [11]. It postulates there is a “life force” energy contained in all things that can be absorbed, cultivated and channeled into activities such as martial combat, medicine, as well as everyday living [38]. In fact, some researchers like Frank [39] suggest Qi is a verb (a process changing over time) rather than a noun (a measurable substance). However, at this juncture, we are less interested in the ontological status of Qi than in the *use* of the concepts of Qi by Western organisations such as Taiji World and how it might illustrate shifts in Western cultural thought and practice of the sort discussed in Campbell’s [40] Easternisation thesis. Taijiquan is presented as simple, yet effective way of promoting subjective wellbeing, especially when practiced in nature and drawing from properties deemed more abundant in these settings.

4.2. Interconnectedness

The view of human interconnectedness in relation to globalisation is a position long held by structurationist theorists like Giddens [41] (pp. 57–58), who considers globalisation as an consequence of a reflexive modernisation processes, commenting: “this extraordinary, and still accelerating interconnectedness between everyday decisions and global outcomes, together with its reverse, the influence of global orders over individual life, forms the key subject-matter of the new agenda”. Nevertheless, we agree with Beck [2] (p. 259) that the notion of interconnectedness needs to and will likely evolve out of our forced interaction with global environmental risk:

Global risks entail being confronted with the global other. They tear down national borders and mix the local with the foreign, not as a consequence of migration, but rather as a consequence of “interconnectedness” (David Held) and risks. Everyday life becomes cosmopolitan: people have to conduct and understand their lives in an exchange with others and no longer exclusively in an interaction with their own kind.

As we shall illustrate later, understandings of interconnectedness as cosmopolitan are not limited to the dynamics of ecological risk, but may also pertain to a broad spectrum of worldly orientations (dispositions) that favour dyadic/holistic outlooks of body, self, culture, society and our physical environment.

At the time of writing, all of Taiji World’s retreats were held in an affluent rural area of Domesday, advertising photos of the retreat venue offer views over a beautiful winding river below gentle hills and dense woodland: “Our venue has been chosen for its atmosphere and stunning location. Designed

to give you the space to unwind, re-charge and go with the flow, Gotheringham House offers all of this and more” [35]. These images (and the actual practice of these arts in this location) are not merely a cosmetic commercial attraction (although it serves such functions well) but more importantly is a consequence of the application of Qi theory itself. It is generally agreed by followers of Daoist practices that external Qi (known as Shen Qi) can be found in most abundance in the natural environment—around trees, lakes, rivers and mountains—and that these may be absorbed into the body. The absorption of Qi is taken to be greatly enhanced by specific exercises such as those found in Taiji and Qigong. Thus, these images are combined with the metaphorical text describing Qi energy to provide an evocative sample of interconnectedness following the Taiji World way and also what might be experienced by a retreat, as illustrated below:

We think you’ll agree that Dontshire goes well with Taiji and Qigong—fresh air equals fresh qi (energy) and fresh qi equals health and vitality. Finding renewed energy and an enlivened approach to life is what our weekend can give you [35].

Besides their emphasis on Qi in open natural spaces, there is a focus on ‘letting go’ of worries caused by modern living and instead living in the present moment, a concept often used in popular Western Buddhist and Daoist-inspired contemporary spiritual writings [42–44]. Taiji World describe their “summer chill out” retreat as follows:

Time to put your feet up, enjoy the expansive views, take a walk to the river and realize that actually when you let go, life is all ok. The weekend will include workshops on Qigong, Taiji and Self Massage. Simple [35].

The retreat is thus designed to provide powerful experiences to stimulate a change in thought, practice, and, ultimately lifestyle of the practitioner. This later aspect of self-cultivated change is emphasised explicitly, “Enjoying a weekend away is precious. A refreshing and relaxing break, however, is something you can treasure way beyond your return home” [35]. Taiji World co-director and instructor Joe offered some personal accounts of connections to nature whilst living and practising Taijiquan in rural natural outdoor settings:

It does give that great feeling of connectedness to the outside. You get all kind of things that could be classed as mystical experiences. You get animals watching you. One place I used to practise in, I used to get loads of butterflies land on me. Which is amazing. Admittedly there were loads of butterflies there and I was moving very slowly, so I was probably quite easy to land on (we laugh). I used to practise on a beach, and the seals used to come and watch. The female seals liked it, but the male seals didn’t like it all, and were quite threatened by it. God knows what that means! (We laugh). Birds watch it; birds of prey have landed and watched me practise. Yeah, that quietness and stillness. You just blend in. To be able to let go of everything and just be there, be in nature. It’s a very amazing feeling that we miss in our society. We’re surrounded by walls, TV screens...we don’t just wander around the forest like a hunter gatherer. Taiji is a really good way of accessing that [37].

This deliberative experiential focus of self-cultivation is described by Brown [45] (p. 11) as, “a combined sensation in which interoception, proprioception and exteroception are focused on simultaneously”. For Joe, this has led to an elective affinity between his Taiji practice in the natural environment, Daoist thought and his own beliefs about the environment:

I was brought up as an environmentalist really. I expect that kind of connection will influence the Taiji, to an extent. I know some people think it's a bit airy-fairy, but if you practise Taiji outside, it's totally different. If you practise it on a beach, a field, a forest...it's good to practise that stuff. I say to my students, “If you practise somewhere nice, you'll feel good. But if you practise in your bedroom, that's fine. If you practise on the verge of the *** [local motorway], then you're going to have a different feeling.” The Chinese knew about organisational space, working with natural energies. That's true for pre-modern Western culture as well. It does give that great feeling of connectedness to the outside [37].

There are notable parallels here with Atkinson's [46] (p. 191) findings in a study of Parkour traceurs (practitioners), in which he reports, “an urban traceur often articulates feeling as if he or she possesses a ‘total connection’ with one's mind, movement, and the surrounding physical environment”. This suggests that certain movement forms do more than merely take place in an environment, certain activities encourage (or require) participants to ‘merge’ (experientially) with their environment for that period of time.

4.3. *Alternative Meta-Narrative*

Beck's [2] third positive thesis of a cosmopolitan vision of ecology is that it requires the construction of a new meta-narrative that dis/re-places the modernist notions of Western modernisation and natural exploitation in favour of an alternative, the contours of which he articulates below:

It is not a ‘singing into the apocalypse’, and it is not simply a ‘wake-up call to reality’. Rather it is about expectation and anticipation, it is about a narrative to dream differently. ‘Emancipation’ is the key word. Either the ecological concern manages to be at least as powerful as this hunger for modernization or it is condemned to repeated failure (p. 265).

This conception is well captured by The Taiji World Facebook [35] group site, which sums up the organisation's ambitious mission in three stated objectives:

- To bring the benefits of Taiji to as many people as possible.
- To be contemporary, relevant and ethical.
- To be the first Taiji company to interact with 1 million people.

These bold statements feed a vision that for us echoes what Beck [2] refers to as a cosmopolitan vision of ecology and is expressed as an alternative narrative for ethical and sustainable wellbeing practices. These are also supported by Joe's reflections:

We are trying to pass on Taiji as a healing, meditative art to as many people as possible in an accessible way. So (to) as many people can benefit from it. That's our core principle: To millions of people. We do that through lessons, retreats, merchandise [37].

The visions expressed here for the development of self-cultivated individuals who use Taijiquan as a medium suggests an alternative narrative for change expressed by Joe as a pathway. He reports, “If you’re doing Taiji, that doesn’t make you necessarily a better person. Hopefully it would. You’re on a pathway, and are hopefully on the right direction” [37]. The “pathway” seems to reflect a fusion of self-cultivation ideas and practices, anchored to the development of wellbeing through movement and experiencing interconnectedness between body-self, others and a particular view of nature.

There are also a number of more discrete elements that also feed this alternative meta-narrative. Firstly, taking all of the above data as illustrations, the translation and adaptation of Daoist metaphor and symbolism by Taiji World are suggestive of what Dawson [36] refers to as the effect of the *Western habitus* on transforming these arts. For example, the concept of packaging and selling a commodified experience of Taijiquan is a Western consumerist strategy [47] and the way in which it fits in with the Western social and dispositional structure of the “weekend break” is similarly indicative. Concepts such as “fresh air” are woven into the descriptions of Qi energy flow and are also loaded with Western connotations about the “natural” environment which is where most of us believe fresh air is to be had, and that fresh air is in some way beneficial to our wellbeing. Daoist Qi theory and the concept of *Wu Wei* have also been woven together with the western tropes of “unwind, re-charge and go with the flow” to promote an imaginary of Taijiquan practice that is recognisable in terms of idealised Western leisure and relaxation. Further, adaptations are illustrated by Taiji World’s “Tao of Pooh” weekend, where practitioners learned some Taijiquan whilst later reading passages from the well-known book by Daoist-inspired writer Benjamin [43]. Again, the playful symbolism of Pooh Bear as an unwitting Daoist sage appeals to a Western cultural frame of reference and shows the adaption of a central metanarrative. The organisers further elaborate on this philosophical dimension in relation to another ‘Tao of Taiji’ event:

Finding new energy through complete relaxation with awareness and intention is what Taiji is all about. On the weekend you will discover what this means for you ‘in Taiji’ and “in your life.” It promises to be a transformative weekend in which you can discover personal nuggets of Taiji wisdom [35].

These adaptations also illustrate symmetry with Heelas and Woodhead’s [48] subjectivisation thesis, that is, the rise and success of those spiritual philosophies or belief systems that can be personalised by individual participants. Campbell [40] (p. 342) comes to similar conclusions, stating: “The different life experiences of people give rise to different needs for meaning, and hence to functional differentiated belief systems”. These conceptual interpretations appear consistent with Joe’s understanding of his own students’ motivations and how the art and his presentation of it as a teacher must be adaptable given the multiple meanings for other practitioners:

Most people do just do it for a bit of exercise, because they enjoy it. They see people under the trees, by the lake, it’s beautiful...and that’s what it feels: It’s relaxation. They don’t want to know how to use it [martial applications]. But some people do. It’s a broad church... Again, you can really only pass on what you know [37].

In addition to the above, there are a number of other symbolic and practical elements that the Taiji World directors weave into their alternative meta-narrative promoted through Taijiquan practice. The

retreat venue illustrated above and only prepares locally sourced “ethical” vegetarian food. Taiji World offers transport to the location in their “eco-friendly” Mercedes, which is powered by bio-fuel from recycled vegetable oil. Taiji World also promote an eco-clothing range, as the founder Paul Smith explained in a popular online martial arts forum:

Initially we have done a range of t-shirts, using bamboo fabric which is really light and soft. We only use organic or environmentally friendly fabric. The shirts are really nice—inspired by some well-known Taiji moves and the concept of qi [35].

Joe reflects on the this practice in the following:

We also sell merchandise and stuff. Eco-friendly, Taiji t-shirts. Because if you look at yoga wear, there’s loads of really funky yoga wear. Taiji, you get silk pyjamas or whatever. Not everyone’s into that. I’m not into that, the culture of the uniform and that kind of thing. You should just dress comfortably. Paul’s developed some very nice Taiji t-shirts. You try to make a living out of it, and it’s very difficult to make a living out of it by teaching only. The more strings on it, the better [37].

Lastly, the highly visible promotion of networking between Taiji World and other ethical/ecological organisations is further indicative of emerging cosmopolitan vision of ecology outlined by Beck [2]. The association underlines its transformative vision for/with Taijiquan via a series of prominently advertised links to a range of eco/ethical “partner” organisations including Schumacher College, Natural Matters, the Coral Collective and Tree Nation, as they state proudly on their Facebook pages and website [35]:

Embrace tree: We’ve just planted another 5 trees in Africa, with Tree Nation. You can water them here and plant some more. That’s 17 so far!

Tree Nation: Free social community dedicated to fighting climate change. Get involved and help Tree Nation plant 8 million trees in Africa, creating a giant heart shaped park...

5. Summary and Reflections

Work presented by Cynarski, Litwiniuk and Blach [49] and Sieber, Litwiniuk, Cynarski [50] make the case that a humanist martial arts approach informed by Taoist and Buddhist beliefs of non-aggression, psychophysical and moral improvements “serve the idea of ecological education well”. What intrigues us at this point in our research is that these data seem to suggest that some physical cultures such as Taijiquan with shared embodied experiences and practices may indeed help “sow the seeds of environmental awareness” [4] (p. 388) in ways which substantially compliment and augment cognitive schemas. Agreeing with Shove and Pantzar [51] (p. 45) who state that if, “we work with the notion that practices involve the active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence”, then evident connections emerge between the development of a cosmopolitan vision of ecology with Kasper’s [52] (p. 318) idea of an ecological habitus, which, “refers to the embodiment of a durable yet changeable system of ecologically relevant dispositions, practices, perceptions, and material conditions—perceptible as a lifestyle—that is shaped by and helps shape socioecological contexts”. That organisations such as Taiji World promote visions of a cosmopolitan ecology does

suggest certain elective affinities with other movements such as Deep Ecology, the New Age movement and environmentalism more generally with the principle driver for this being the link provided by the Western adaption of Daoist principles. In this sense, Taiji World's interpretation and adaption of Daoism through movement seeks to put into practice alternative philosophically-orientated lifestyles and belief systems. We agree with Clarke [10] (p. 139) who reflects: "it is inevitable that in their transposition to the West these ancient arts, along with their theoretical presuppositions, should have undergone a degree of metamorphosis". However, in spite of these changes, he maintains that:

Certain basic elements—the integration of physical and mental therapies, or internal and external energies, the emphasis on meditation, harmony and balance, and perhaps above all their sense of being close to the rhythms of nature—mean that these techniques will enjoy continuing appeal in the West.

In addition, our analysis very much concurs with La Rochelle's [8] (p. 78) conclusions that, "When Asian traditions such as taiji quan (and qigong, yoga or Buddhist meditation) arrived in the West, a dialogue arose between two great cultural horizons." He further contends that these traditions are taken up and evolved in line with Western (in the case of La Rochelle's work, North American) expectations and often do so with an appeal to the authority of "ancient" texts and thereby make "the new appear old". We would consider dialogues about what Taijiquan is and what it can do for us, in the UK context at least, is still very much *ongoing*. Moreover, Taijiquan is being transposed and reinvented in ways which illustrate Beck's [2] (p. 255) point, that a cosmopolitan vision of ecology requires, above all, "everyday support from below, the backing of everyday people of different classes, different nations, different political ideologies, different countries". Beck invites the consideration of how everyday people may come to dream differently. Organisations like Taiji World and people like Joe suggest to us that just such a cosmopolitan ecology centred on "interconnectedness", subjective wellbeing and alternative meta-narratives for living are already present and discernible in the sociocultural landscape. However, we must also remain cautious in relation to the extent and efficacy with which organisations promoting Daoist arts and Taijiquan might contribute to a cosmopolitan vision of ecology. Therefore, we caution that the work presented here is merely a beginning, and considerable further research is needed that explores more critically, in terms of how organisations such as Taiji World and their practitioners' beliefs and practices translate into sustainable lifestyles in a wider sense, and, crucially, how these interconnect with important factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, individualism and commerciality. Such investigations will be necessary to shed light more precisely on how these forms of "support from below" can contribute to the building of a cosmopolitan vision of ecology that is so needed if the greening of modernity is to be a real possibility.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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